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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the relationship of campaign media attention to cognition, strength of the commitment to the candidate choice, and probability of voting. The 1985 gubernatorial campaign in Virginia was selected for analysis. A model constructed for predicting voting tendencies hypothesizes that the role of the mass media is largely indirect, affecting voters through its effects on cognition. Data were collected through 388 telephone interviews conducted with randomly selected subjects in October 1985. Data analysis indicated that news media attention to the campaign did appear to have both direct and indirect effects on the probability of voting. References, figures and tables are appended. (DF)

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A PARTIAL MODEL FOR PREDICTING THE PROBABILITY OF VOTING

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A Partial Model for

Predicting the Probability of Voting

Researchers concerned with predicting and explaining voting behavior have developed theories which often seem to consist of two sorts of factors: social structural variables such as age, marital status, education and income; and psychological factors such as political efficacy, trust in the political system, and alienation.

Although early studies showed that use of news media is positively related to political participation and voting (Berelson, Lazarsfeld and McPhee, 1954) news media use has not often played a causal role in theories of participation. The reason for this probably lies in the acceptance of the "limited effects" model and its assumptions that predominated during the 1950s. Even now, however, political researchers continue to test multivariate models aimed at predicting political participation and voting, with little interest in mass media variables (Dietz, 1976; Beck, 1977; Zipp, Landerman and Luebke, 1982; Rubinfeld, 1980).

The purpose of this paper is to report on a more media-oriented approach to predicting voting, or more precisely in this case, the intention to vote.

It is a common finding that people with high incomes and education are more likely to vote than those with low incomes and less education. Older people are more likely to vote than younger people (although linear correlations sometimes hide a somewhat curvilinear relationship; voting seems to peak in late middle age and then slowly decline). Men and whites have traditionally been found to be more politically participatory than women and blacks, although these are complex relationships, depending often on age, education and geography (Milbrath and Goel, 1977; Conway, 1981; Hadley, 1978).

Such relationships were found in the earliest studies of voting and continue to be important. While these variables do predict, they don't necessarily "explain" very much in a substantive way. These background variables are, therefore, commonly seen to be the antecedents in a causal chain. They themselves are associated with, or perhaps cause, more psychological variables, such as what Verba and Nie have termed "civic attitudes," which then have been hypothesized to lead to voting (Verba and Nie, 1972, p. 21).

However, to overlook communication variables seems to be missing the most important process by which democratic politics function. Meadow (1980) points out that the relationships between demographic characteristics and psychological factors, while consistent, are "less interesting from a political communication perspective than the role played by information in participation" (p. 82). The outcome of many of the demographic and psychological characteristics typically related to voting is to place individuals in the audience for

information. Meadow notes that those who vote tend to be the most informed members of the community, the ones who attend to the news media and those who are in interpersonal networks with high political content. He concludes that "individuals with mass media and interpersonal political communication networks are likely to be transmitters of political messages (through participation) as well as receivers" (p. 82).

When communications variables are incorporated into models of voting behavior, they usually turn out to be important. Blumler and McLeod, in a study of the 1970 British elections, found that the 10 variables in their multivariate analyses of voting behavior "that measured some sort of communication behavior" accounted for considerably more variance among young voters, when taken together, than the other 30 non-communication factors they included in their analysis. They concluded, "It is clear that communication variables bulked large in the main sample analysis of young first-time electors. Both interpersonal and mass communication influences had independently affected turnout when many other possible contaminating or confounding variables had been controlled (p. 294).

Allen and Chaffee, in a study of blacks in San Francisco, found that "adding the mass communication variables to the factors dealt with in prior research on black political participation doubles the explanatory power of our analysis. It appears, then, that we are dealing with a substantial set of relationships that deserve detailed examination." They found that psychological variables, which play a central role in many models of vote turnout, "make minimal contribution

to our understanding of black participation, in terms either of incremental variance accounted for or implication in processes linking background or media variables to participation" (p. 519). These psychological variables included measurements of black identity, alienation from white society and anomie.

McLeod, Bybee and Durall looked at the effects of viewing televised presidential debates on voting behavior. They found that when members of groups that are typically least likely to vote watched the debates, they were more likely to vote than the members of the same nonparticipatory groups who had not watched the debates. Thus, while people in these categories were unlikely to be in the audience, "to the extent that less active citizens did view the debates, they benefited equally with their more involved counterparts" (1979, p. 484).

Finally, Shaffer (1981) looked at declining newspaper reliance as a reason for declining levels of turnout in presidential elections from 1960 to 1976. He found, "Decreased reliance on newspapers explains 20 percent of the turnout decline. The importance of reliance on newspapers for campaign information is illustrated by the observation that turnout decreased only 3.0 percent and 1.5 percent for the two highest reliance groups, compared to over 10 percent for each of the 3 lowest categories" (p. 90).

These findings seem to indicate that any model that attempts to predict voting intention or behavior should incorporate measures of campaign news media use. The Allen and Chaffee study gives a pointer as to how the process might actually work. They note the important interaction between education and media use: "In general, media use can

be seen as an important stage in the process by which education is consummated in political activity" (p. 520). More highly educated people use the media more, and as other research has shown, obtain more from their media use than people with less education (Findahl and Hoijer 1981). One should expect, therefore, that news media use is a part of a complex process in which various background variables are translated into political activity. For example, Allen and Chaffee called media use an "intervening element" (p. 519), summarizing the media's role "not as an independent variable isolated from other social processes but as a facilitating factor that helps to explain the translation of background and psychological variables into political participation." Beyond this, however, is the possibility that the news media may have cognitive and attitudinal effects that may be involved in the decision to vote. Thus, while Allen and Chaffee point out that the media may turn education into action, they may indirectly affect voting because of their effects on cognition and attitudes.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the relationship of campaign media attention to cognition, strength of the commitment to the candidate choice and, ultimately, to probability of voting. The campaign of concern here is the 1985 gubernatorial race in Virginia.

A Partial Model of Turnout

Figure 1 shows a hypothesized model that attempts to predict the self-reported probability of voting in the 1985 gubernatorial race in Virginia. The process described in this model considers such variables

as age, race, sex and education to be antecedent variables, all of which are related to campaign communication variables--attention to the campaign in newspapers and on television, and discussion of the campaign -and the strength of the person's political party identification and interest in the campaign. All these factors are expected to relate to campaign cognition. The next step in the process has to do with the strength of the respondent's preference for his or her candidate choices. Campaign cognition along with strength of party identification were expected to predict this, which was felt to be an attitudinal factor serving as a motivation to vote.

Figure 1 about here

Increases in knowledge are probably the most commonly reported results of news media use (O'Keefe and Atwood, 1981; Atkin, 1981), and a major assumption of this paper is that cognition is the means by which the media exert their influence. A previous study has shown a relationship between cognitions held about economic issues and the strength of the attitude held about the economic policies of the Reagan administration (Kennamer, forthcoming). And if an attitude implies a predisposition to behave toward an attitude object, then it seems to follow that the stronger that attitude, the more likely the behavior.

To summarize, the model presented in Figure 1 hypothesizes that

background variables along with campaign related communication, interest and strength of party identification will predict campaign cognition. This in turn, likely accompanied by strength of party affiliation, will predict strength of the candidate choice, which in turn will predict probablility of voting. Thus, the role of the mass media is seen to be largely indirect, operating through its effects on cognition.

The 1985 Virginia Governors Election

The 1985 races for governor, lieutenant governor and attorney general were historic, even by Virginia standards. In the seat of the Confederacy where every aspect of life is governed by reverence for tradition, it was truly revolutionary, and widely felt to be suicidal, when the Democratic party nominated a black man, State Senator Douglas Wilder, as the party's candidate for lieutenant governor, and a woman and state legislator Mary Sue Terry for attorney general. It was even more surprising, as the election approached, that the complete Democratic slate stood a very good chance of winning. It was widely felt that a win by the Democrats would profoundly and permanently change Virginia politics. All three Democrats won, and rather handily. The election was also seen as a referendum on the record of immensely popular out-going governor Charles Robb, who since this election has been on everyone's "mention list" of potential presidential or vice presidential candidates. Because of its historic nature and its implication for national politics, this election drew a great deal of interest, both within Virginia and nationally.

Method

The data with which this model will be tested consist of 388 telephone interviews conducted in October, 1985 by students in a public opinion class at Virginia Commonwealth University in the Richmond, Va. metropolitan area. The sample was obtained by random sampling from the telephone directory with a random-digit, add-on procedure used to ensure the possibility of obtaining new numbers, changed numbers and unlisted numbers in the sample.

The dependent variable in the study is the probability that the respondent would vote in the election for governor. Two questions were used to construct this question. First, respondents were asked if they were registered to vote. If they were not, they were given a zero on this variable. Those who said they were registered were asked to estimate on a scale of 0 to 10 how likely they were to vote, with 10 meaning that they definitely would vote. Working backward through the model, the strength of the candidate choice is created by combining the sureness of the preferences for the three races. For each race, the respondents were asked for their preference. If they were undecided, they were asked if they were leaning toward one or the other of the candidates. Thus, for each race, there was a 1-5 scale running from firmly decided for the Democratic candidate, leaning toward him or her, undecided, leaning toward the Republican and firmly decided for the Republican. Each scale was then "folded" to create a strength of choice scale running from 1 to 3, where 3 stands for those with firm choices, 2 for those who are leaning toward one or the other candidates and 1 for those who were said they would vote for neither. In each case, as well,

those who responded "don't know" were given a 0. These scales for the three races were then summed to create the final strength of choice variable.

The cognition variable is also made up of three indexes, all of them presumably measuring some sort of campaign cognition. The respondents were asked to name what they thought was the most important issue in the campaign, and then as many as five other important issues. These were combined so that it was possible to record as may as six issues. So the first portion of the cognition variable is simply the number of campaign issues named. The second portion is composed of six questions in which the respondents were asked to [redacted] name the six candidates for the three offices. This index has a potential range of 0-6. The final cognition subindex consists of responses to five attitude questions, for example,"Which candidate for governor, Gerald Baliles or Wyatt Durrette, do you think would be more likely to try to clean up the Chesapeake Bay?" Respondents were given a point for simply answering these questions with something other than a "don't know." This subindex could range from 0-5. The three portions were summed to create a 17-point cognitions index.

The media attention questions asked the respondents how much attention they pay "to stories about the governor's election—a lot some, a little, or none?" Separate questions were asked for newspaper and television news. The discussion variable is a combination of two questions. One asked them if they talked about "the upcoming election with other people" several times a day, about every day, a few times during the week, or not at all. Those who said they talked about

the election were then asked whether they usually started these discussions, joined in after someone else began them or just listened. These two questions were combined to form a 9-point scale, the highest value given to those repondents who said they talked about the election several times a day and usually started those conversations. An intermediate score was given to those respondents who said they talked about the election a few times a week and usually joined in conversations that were already underway. Persons who said they did not talk about the elections at all were given a 0 on this scale.

Strength of party identification was created first by using a standard 7-point scale from strong Republican to strong Democrat and "folding it" so that the strong Republicans and strong Democrats received a 4, the "not strong" party identifiers were given a 3, those who would admit to being "closer to" one of the parties were given a 2 and those who who refused to identify themselves with either party were given a 1. A "don't know" response to the "closer to" question resulted in a 0 on this scale. Interest in the election was measured on a four point scale: very, somewhat, slightly and not interested.

Age was measured in actual years of age, and education as the highest year of schooling completed, coded to 22 for Ph.D or professional. Sex and race were used as dummy variables in the analyses.

Table 1 shows the means, standard deviations, ranges and number of respondents for each of these variables. In addition, the sample is 42 percent male and 58 percent female, 80 percent white, 19 percent black and 1 percent other.

Table 1 about here

On the Reliability of Voting Measures

It should be pointed out here that the measure of voting is self-reported probability; it is not a measure of actual behavior. Obviously it over-estimates actual voting. Various researchers have estimated the degree of such over-reporting at between 4 and 8 percent (Clausen, 1968), at least 10 percent (Hadley, 1978) and 14 or 15 percent (Shaffer, 1981). Therefore, this measure should be considered a combination of actual voting intention and adherence to a social norm concerning voting.

Analysis

A path analytic approach was taken in order to test the model proposed in Figure 1. Concerning the ability of such techniques to determine causality from correlational data, Asher (1983) notes that they "allow one to conclude that a causal relationship exists, but this conclusion holds only under a restrictive set of conditions. In effect, one makes inferences that a causal relationship exists on the basis of patterns observed in one's data and assumptions made about the relationships among one's variables; causality is not directly established" (p. 12). In other words, causal inferences are only as good as the models and theories being tested. No matter how they are analyzed, correlational data are correlational data. So this paper should be considered an exploration into the "tenability of a theoretical model" (Kerlinger and Pedazur, 1973, p. 307).

The assumption here is also that this is a nonrecursive model, in that causality flows predominantly from left to right through the model. Such an assumption, if warranted, vastly simplifies the analysis strategy and interpretations. Since prediction of the communication variables, interest and strength of party identification is not the issue of concern in this analysis, these analyses are not included. Although race, sex, education and age are theoretically prior to these variables, their relationships to them are of only peripheral interest to this paper. In addition, a complete path model would require that all the variables in the second stage of the model be regressed against each other, and for these variables the non-recursive assumption is clearly untenable. Since the prediction of these variables is not of interest to this paper, it is perhaps wiser to avoid these issues entirely here. First order correlations among all of the variables in the analysis are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 about here

The analysis consists, therefore, of three regression equations. In the first equation the cognitions variable is regressed against age, education, race, sex, newspaper and television attention, strength of party identification, interest and discussion. The second equation regresses strength of candidate choice on all of these variables plus cognitions. In the final equation, probability of voting is regressed against all previous variables, including cognitions and strength of candidate choice.

Results

The results are presented in Figure 2, which shows standardized betas that are significant at the 0.10 level or better. The model succeeds in predicting 41 percent (multiple r = 0.65; adjusted R square [redacted]) of the variance in the cognitions variable, the first of the series of dependent variables. There are significant paths to cognition from interest in the election, education, party strength, age, discussion, and newspaper attention at the 0.05 level of significance. At the 0.10 level, television attention also displays a significant path to cognition.

The model is considerably less successful in predicting strength of candidate choice, explaining only 13 percent of the variance (adjusted R square; multiple r = 0.40). Strength of candidate choice is predicted by strength of party identification, race (negative beta for whites), television attention and cognitions at the 0.05 level. At the 0.10 level, newspaper attention also becomes a significant, although negative, predictor.

The testing of the final equation shows that strength of candidate choice is indeed a weak link in the model. Predictors of probability of voting, at the 0.05 significance level, are age, television attention, cognitions, and interest in the election. Raising the significance level to 0.10 adds no variables to the list of predictors. Strength of candidate choice is not a factor in this analysis. These four variables explain 34 percent of the variance in the probability of voting (adjusted R square; multiple r = 0.60).

These results seem to indicate that strength of candidate choice is not part of the model predicting probability of voting, but perhaps should be seen as a separate dependent variable, rather than an endogenous variable in the model predicting probability of voting. In light of this, the analysis was repeated, this time without the strength of choice variable, and also omitting race and sex, neither of which predicted either cognitions or probability of voting. Figure 3 shows the results for this revised model. Interest, education, strength of party identification, age, discussion, television attention and newspaper attention are all significant predictors of cognitions. Combined, these seven variables explain 41 percent of the variance in cognitions.

Figure 3 about here

Probability of voting is explained, in this reduced model, by cognitions, age, television attention and interest. These four variables account for 36 percent of the variance in voting probability.*

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*Strictly speaking, the R Square should decrease after variables are deleted (Berry and Feldman, 1985), rather than increase slightly as it does here. What also occurs with the deletion of variables, however, is an increase in the number of respondents in the analysis, from 268 to 304. Thus, the analyses are not entirely comparable, since they are conducted on somewhat different samples.

Discussion

To summarize, news media attention to the campaign does seem to have both direct and indirect effects on the probability of voting, working, it seems, through their effects on cognitions. The same can be said for education and discussion. Strength of the candidate preference seems to be a separate outcome of the model, rather than one of its endogenous variables, it being predicted by several variables in the equation, although not very well, but not itself having a significant relationship to the probability of voting.

There are actually three dependent variables to discuss here: cognitions, strength of choice and probability of voting. Communications variables have an effect on all three of them. With other variables held constant, discussion of the election and attention to newspaper stories about it predict cognitions. Attention to television news stories about the election shows a somewhat weaker relationship to cognitions. Strength of preferences is predicted by cognitions, newspaper attention (negatively), race (negative for whites) and strength of party identification. Finally, probability of voting is predicted by cognitions, attention to television, interest and age.

A curious factor here is that while newspaper attention has more impact than television attention on cognition, television attention has more direct impact on voting probability. Thus, an interpretation is that newspaper attention has its affect on voting indirectly through cognitions, while television's impact is more direct, and perhaps more directly motivational. Chaffee and Choe have proposed that "the

emergence of television as the principal vehicle for political campaigning has probably reduced the amount of motivation required for a person to become exposed to campaign messages" (1980, p. 55). They propose that television coverage of campaigns may serve to motivate previously uninterested individuals, who otherwise would not be in the audience for campaign news. Given the weak relationship between television news attention and cognitions, and its direct relationship to probability of voting, some process of this sort may be identifiable here.

The effort to integrate strength of candidate choice as a predictor of voting probability and as a result of cognitions was unsuccessful. The model was notably unsuccessful in predicting this variable, especially compared to the amount of variance accounted for in cognitions and voting probability. Strength of choice could obviously be better predicted by variables not in this equation, and it could perhaps be measured better. In this situation, most people had made a candidate choice, and there were relatively few people in the "leaning" categories. Table 1 shows that the mean value of this variable is quite high, 7.97 out of a possible 9, with a standard deviation of only 2.2. This might indicate that a lack of variance, due to the way it was measured, and also in the way the variable exists in the sample, may have depressed the possibility of discovering the hypothesized relationships.

But for the moment, we must conclude that whereas strength of candidate choice is perhaps an interesting outcome of cognitions directly and media use both directly and indirectly, there is no evidence to support the hypothesized role in predicting vote probability.

We are left with a rather simple model, compared to many that have been tested, which nonetheless accounts for a significant amount of variance—in both the statistical and substantive senses. Erikson (1981), for example, used 19 variables to predict 24 percent of the variance in voting registration, 17 variables to predict 11 percent of the variance in primary voting and 14 variables to predict 4 percent of the variance in voting in the regular election.

And as in other studies, news media use turned out to be important here, both in predicting cognitions and in directly predicting voting. Erikson, in his equation predicting registration, found that "varibles that seemingly tap `political sophistication'—involvement, opinionation, mass media attention, knowledge and interest—appear relatively high up on the list of variables predicting registration" (p. 269). This study does not contain psychological variables, although interest and strength of party identification could be construed as such, and it perhaps can be criticized for this. It is for this reason that the model tested here was termed a partial model of voting turnout. However, Allen and Chaffee found that the addition of media variables doubled the variance accounted for in their measures of participation over what was accounted for with models containing background and psychological variables. Other studies that have incorporated such psychological orientations and attitudes in multivariate analyses have found them to be of limited usefulness in predicting voting. (Dietz, 1976; Beck, 1977).

Such psychological orientations—sense of duty or obligation to vote, alienation, anomie, efficacy and so forth—aside from being very

(17)

hard to measure, are also highly related to background characteristics such as education and income. Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) found that some 60 percent of college graduates expressed a sense of citizen's duty to vote, compared to 40 percent of those with less education (p. 18-19). The point may be that the addition of such variables to the model tested here would likely add little to its overall effectiveness.

There can be many reasons for voting; it is not a simple act. People can be led to it down different paths. Blumler and McLeod note that "we may be dealing with `informed turnout,' `concerned turnout,' and `obligatory turnout'" (1974, p. 302). This study has assumed a path toward informed turnout, one similar to that described by Blumler and McLeod as favoring "a relatively informed and competent style of participation" (p. 299). Other paths might involve concern over specific issues or simple feelings of obligation to vote because it is one's duty as a citizen. These two are not explicitly treated in this study, although it can be perhaps assumed that they are not independent, that the state of being informed may contribute to concern over issues, and help develop a sense of obligation. Or perhaps having concerns over issues will lead to increased information and a sense of duty to vote. Finally, perhaps having the obligation to vote will lead one to the following process: "I've got to vote, so I guess I'd better find out who these people are so I can do it right." It seems that no matter what what path people take to the decision to cast a vote, cognition is to found along the way somewhere. And wherever it is found, the news media can't be too far away.

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Figure 1

Partial Model of Turnout

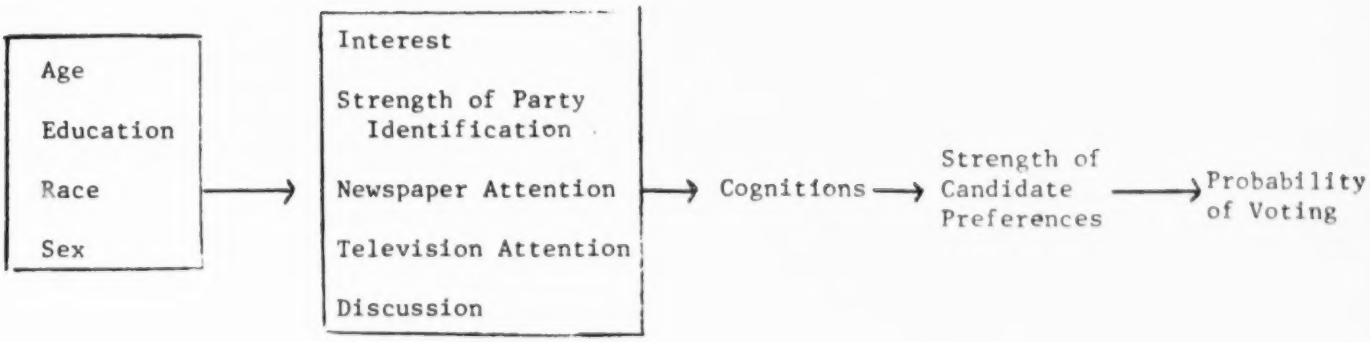

Figure 2

Results of Path Analysis: Standardized Betas

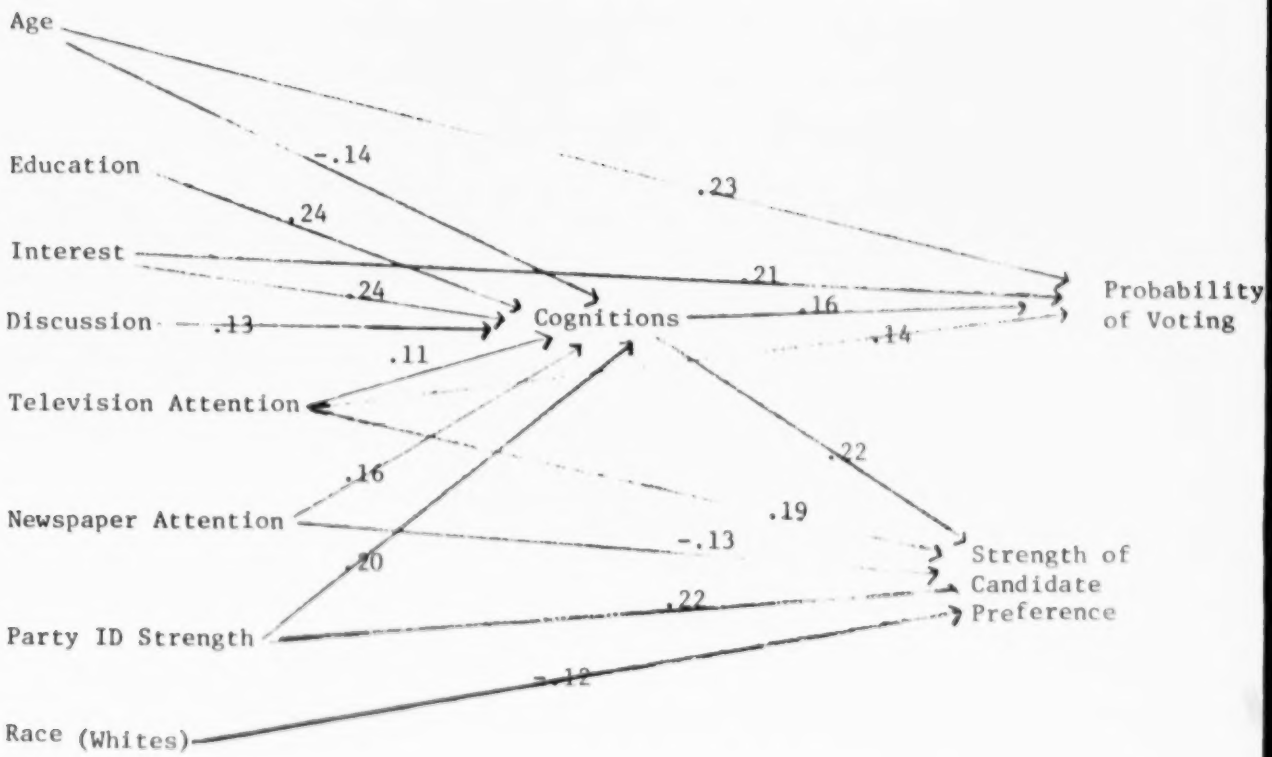

Figure 3

Revised Path Model: Standardized Betas

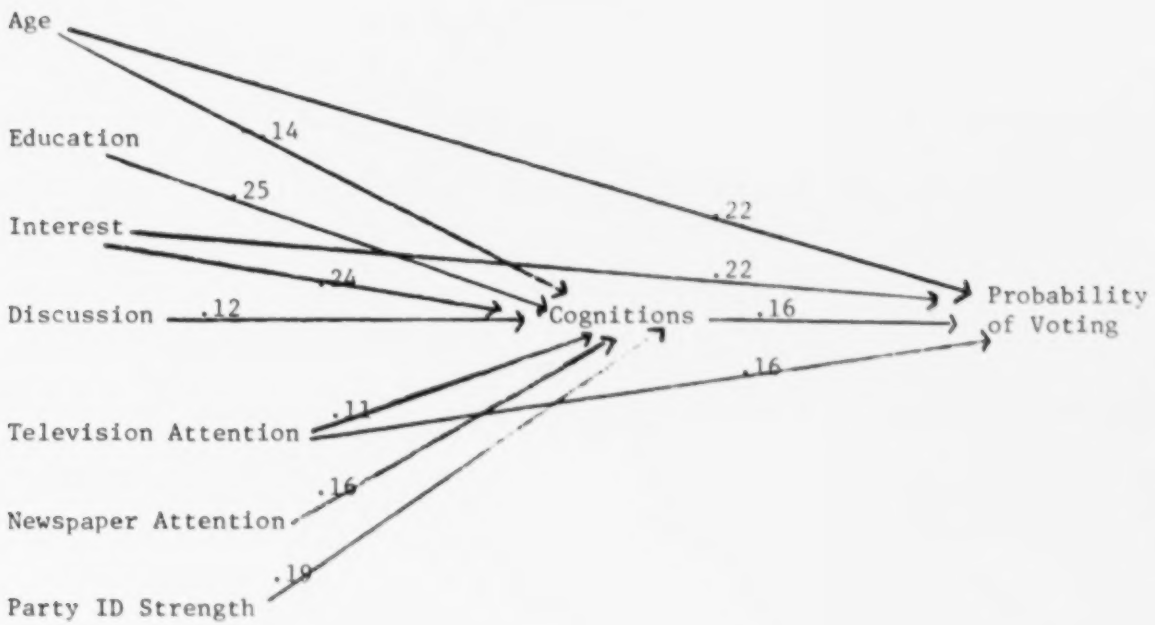

TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations, Ranges and Number of Cases for Variables

	Mean	S.D.	Range	N
Age	41.40	16.63	18-99	371
Education	14.06	2.80	2-22	375
Party ID Strength	2.77	1.09	0-4	360
Interest	3.02	0.96	1-4	386
Television Attention	2.94	0.91	1-4	375
Newspaper Attention	2.65	0.99	1-4	360
Discussion	2.92	2.67	0-9	375
Cognitions	7.91	3.97	0-17	388
Strength of Candidate Choice	7.97	2.20	0-9	354
Probability of Voting	7.77	3.80	0-10	378

Table 2
Bivariate Correlations

	Education	Party ID Strength	Television Attention	Newspaper Attention	Discussion	Interest	Cognitions	Strength of Preference	Probability of Voting
Age	-0.22 (364) p=0.00	0.20 (348) p=0.00	0.15 (361) p=0.00	0.10 (345) p=0.03	0.03 (359) p=0.28	0.21 (370) p=0.00	-0.10 (371) p=0.03	-0.02 (341) p=0.38	0.25 (367) p=0.00
Education		-0.02 (353) p=0.35	0.16 (364) p=0.00	0.18 (350) p=0.00	0.16 (363) p=0.00	0.09 (373) p=0.04	0.35 (375) p=0.00	0.16 (347) p=0.00	0.16 (373) p=0.00
Party ID Strength			0.16 (350) p=0.00	0.18 (335) p=0.00	0.11 (347) p=0.02	0.18 (359) p=0.00	0.27 (360) p=0.00	0.32 (336) p=0.00	0.23 (354) p=0.00
Television Attention				0.62 (351) p=0.00	0.37 (362) p=0.00	0.52 (373) p=0.00	0.40 (375) p=0.00	0.23 (342) p=0.00	0.40 (365) p=0.00
Newspaper Attention					0.44 (348) p=0.00	0.55 (358) p=0.00	0.47 (360) p=0.00	0.12 (329) p=0.00	0.42 (351) p=0.00
Discussion						0.40 (373) p=0.00	0.42 (375) p=0.00	0.13 (343) p=0.00	0.30 (366) p=0.00
Interest							0.45 (386) p=0.00	0.17 (353) p=0.00	0.50 (377) p=0.00
Cognition								0.35 (354) p=0.00	0.42 (378) p=0.00
Strength of Preference									0.25 (349) p=0.00